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A comparative study of a sample of forty-eight suburban Cook County, Illinois, elementary school systems investigated the relationships among three major variables: community structure, community-level or popular decision-making, and institutional decision-making. Data utilized in the study were votes cast in district board elections and referenda, descriptive information on school systems and census materials. The first two were gathered through extensive interviews with the district superintendents involved. The study was based on the hypothesis that the American political culture seeks the suppression of conflict, and communities were compared by their differential successes in reaching this goal.

Results of the study indicate that the principal aspect of social structure which explains aggregate community behavior toward schools is the status factor, i.e., the presence in the system of larger proportions of people with high incomes, education, and occupation. Relationships between styles of decision-making at the community level and in school system institutions show theoretically analogous patterns. In districts of relatively low conflict, school boards usually appear to give their superintendents wide latitudes of initiative and decision while in high conflict systems board members and other functionaries seem to have more power independent of the superintendent. The kinds of administrative decisions questioned in the different districts also differ, with low conflict areas interested in questions of finance and construction, and high conflict districts raising questions about personnel and minor policy matters. Nominating caucuses and other mediating mechanisms are typically used in low conflict high resource communities as a major part of the conflict-management system.

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Educational Decision-Making in Suburban Communities: School Board and Community Linkages

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Professional administrators, students of educational affairs, and social scientists alike are interested in gathering social truths upon which decisional machinery can be made to work and effective policies based. Such truths, however, are slow to come, and even slower are the integrative frameworks of theory that permit easy and accurate movement from generalization to specific prediction or prescription. Presently, at least, our understanding of the social world grows in piecemeal fashion and the best we can hope for are additive effects. Such is the perspective from which this work should be seen.

The premise upon which this paper rests is that any political system must be understood as part of its larger social setting. This is merely to say that such aspects of politics as the form of the political process, its content of policy, and the character of its outputs are related in integral ways with the culture and structure of the society in which it is embedded. Whether or not the school system is characteristically "political" is a question over which we need not tarry here. What is ap-

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parent is that it is amenable to analysis along the lines that this general proposition suggests. Thus a comparative study of school districts demonstrates that they do indeed vary, and that their variations relate systematically to their community contexts. In fact, because their unifunctional foci and their common legal and organizational frameworks have the effect of holding some factors constant, school systems provide exceptionally useful grounds for testing some of the specific propositions that elaborate the general premise stated above.

This picture of the community-school political system must, of course, be stated in less general terms to carry much meaning. It raises questions as to what community characteristics relate to what system characteristics and to what degree. It also raises the question why they are so related. This last is the problem of linkages between community and decision-making system, probably the most difficult points to probe, both on the theoretical level and on the level of empirical demonstration. The research reported here represents an effort in this direction.

The major variables with which we are working are three: community structure, community-level or popular decision-making, and institutional decision-making. Relationships among them have been investigated in a comparative study of a sample of forty-eight suburban Cook County elementary school systems. These are identical in formal structure and legal power, but they vary widely as to community base and some system characteristics. Data utilized in the study are of three general kinds: votes cast in district board elections and referenda, descriptive information on school systems, and census materials. The first two were gathered through extensive interviews with the superintendents of the districts involved.

Our basic task is to explain covariations among the clusters of variables mentioned above. In a sense our base-line is the proposition that in respect to local affairs generally and educational matters par-

ticularly, the American political culture seeks the suppression of conflict. Communities may be compared according to their differential successes in reaching this goal. Thus the variations in which we are interested are variations in community abilities to manage conflict, and these in turn grow out of differential resources for conflict management, resources that make it more or less possible for communities to attain the low-conflict "ideal." Although other factors figure into the picture, the data gathered for this study seem to support this hypothesis. Some districts in the sample tend to show low levels of electoral conflict; these rest on communities with high levels of financial, occupational, and educational-background resources. They tend to place high reliancé on hired technical expertise and to develop caucuses which act as mediating mechanisms. Some, on the other hand, present a converse picture: high electoral conflict, low levels of resources of skills and money, lower reliance on hired technicians, and fewer mediating mechanisms. To put the point in general terms, it appears that ideology and resources in money, skills, and particular attitudes are the linkages between social structure, aggregate community behavior, and decision-making styles and performances. We may now turn to a more specific demonstration of these contentions by reference to our data, which must necessarily be described here in gross and superficial terms.

There are two crucial sets of relationships in this picture of the process of school government: those between community structure and decision-making at the community level, and those between community decision-making and decision-making at the level of authoritative institutions. These we will treat successively in that order.

Indicators of community decision-making characteristics are taken from aggregate election data. Four of these have been calculated to show

levels of community dissent and participation in school affairs over the entire five-year study period. Dissent indexes are, respectively, votes cast for losers in board elections as proportions of total votes cast, and votes cast "no" in school referenda as proportions of total votes cast. Participation indexes simply show proportions of estimated eligible voters casting ballots in elections and referenda. These indexes would seem to measure the texture of gross community reaction to educational affairs, especially the propensity to conflict and the extent to which decisions reflect dissent from the established order.

When these measures of aggregate political behavior are analyzed against social structural characteristics, the strongest relationships are those with indicators of social status. Election dissent and referendum dissent show significant negative correlations, for example, with a composite measure of social rank, and with proportions of college educated people, people in professional-managerial occupations, and family units with incomes over $10,000. Participation in elections shows the same tendency, i.e., significant negative correlations with status variables, but referendum participation shows positive relationships to them, albeit below appropriate levels of confidence.

Life-style variables, on the other hand, do not relate highly to the participation and dissent variables, nor do variables denoting mobility, residence characteristics, population sizes, or parochial school enrollments, except for scattered and low correlations. One exception is fertility which, as one might expect, shows significant relationships to election participation and to dissent on both elections and referenda.

The major point to be made is that the principal aspect of social structure that seems to explain much about aggregate community behavior

toward schools is the status factor, i.e., the presence in the system of larger proportions of people with high incomes, education, and occupation. The significance of these we interpret in terms of two factors favorable to the suppression of educational conflict, namely, an ideology that puts high valuation on education, and a plentitude of resources that can be turned to conflict-management activities. These resources are not simply those available for school finance, for such measures as tax rate and assessed valuation per pupil enrolled do not show very significant relationships with electoral behavior. The linkages, then, seem to lie in more widely held propensities and abilities to make decisions that keep dissent low.

Relationships between styles of decision-making at the community level and decision-making in school system institutions show theoretically analogous patterns. Here, because of the nature of data available, our analysis will proceed largely in terms of types of districts, one in which the propensity to dissent is low (and participation generally low, resources high), the other in which the propensity to dissent is high (and participation therefore high, resources low). The former characteristically have superintendents with longer tenure, and boards with higher educational attainments, higher proportions of woman members, and higher proportions of members in managerial-professional occupations as contrasted to the small proprietors and white collar-sales workers who are more prevalent on boards in high conflict districts.

Evidence indicates that there are definitely different decision-making tendencies in the two kinds of districts. These bear on such things as division of labor between boards and superintendents, role expectations, and likelihood of conflict among board members and between board and superintendent. In low conflict districts boards usually appear to give their superintendents very wide latitudes of initiative and decision. There is

very little indication in such districts that anyone but the superintendent (with the aid of his staff) participates in making up agenda for board meetings, and little indication of board initiative in budgetary matters. Thus superintendents made comments like these: "I initiate 99% of the business in the district;" and "I set up all the business. Sometimes the board members come to me and suggest something needed, but not very often. Usually they come to me first and if I want I put it on the agenda." Both role perception and behavior point to a strong propensity to trust the technically qualified expert, with the board playing a highly acquiescent part. Thus, "The board lets me do the worrying pretty much. They don't initiate much." This relationship apparently extends to the making of decisions themselves. Superintendents summarized their decision systems with statements like these: "The board operates like a legislature, i.e., validating proposals." (Either a very sophisticated or a very naive comment.) "The board usually votes for everything I ask for; I haven't had them raise questions."

In high conflict systems, on the other hand, procedures and relationships look significantly different. Generally speaking, they convey impressions of much less trust and much lower acquiescence. On both agenda and budgets, the superintendents' hands appear to be more tied by participation of board presidents, individual board members, and business managers, board attorneys, and board secretaries. Functionaries in these latter categories seem to have more power independent of the superintendent in low conflict districts. Generally speaking, superintendents in these districts are conditioned to expect a wider range and more detailed participation by the board and by other persons throughout the decision-making process. Their comments also convey a distinctly greater sense of strain and tension in dealings with the board.

Somewhat greater definition can be given to the picture by comparing responses from low and high conflict districts to questions about the kinds of administrative decisions boards are most likely to question. Superintendents in low conflict districts report their boards most likely to raise questions about finance and new construction; almost none said that they were most asked about such things as hiring and other personnel problems or about "minor policies." The converse is the case in high conflict districts, where boards seem to be less interested in finance than in personnel and minor policy matters. It seems probable that these results reflect different skill and ability levels arising out of different occupational compositions of the two types of boards.

There are also indications that boards of the two types organize themselves differently for decision-making. Low conflict boards appear more likely to structure themselves to expedite business -- to make greater use of committees, and to have committees screen problems before they come to the board level. This, like the more liberal reliance on expertise, can be interpreted as reflecting socially-based higher aptitudes for conflict management. The roots lie in higher consensus levels and, more particularly, in the social-resource factors of community characteristics. Efforts to communicate with the community constituency do not seem to differ significantly with type of district nor to have any detectable relationship to participation or dissent. Thus communication in any explicit sense appears not to be a notable linkage between community and authority.

One other interesting piece of evidence on the conflict-management propensities of high resource systems deserves mention. Nominating caucuses are widely used in Illinois school districts, and fortuitously were employed in exactly half of those in our sample. The main task performed by the

caucus is the selection of qualified, "acceptable" candidates for school board positions. Its function appears to be the handling of conflict or potential conflict before it reaches the level of public visibility. School officials in caucus communities regard it, self-consciously or not, as part of the conflict-management system. Within the caucus, much emphasis is placed on "helping" the board and superintendent and keeping the system operating smoothly. Ordinarily, the caucus does not serve to focus discontent but rather to dilute and deflect it. The use of the caucus is one aspect of the general thrust toward conflict suppression. It also reflects the notion that education is a sacred cow, and particularly a sacred cow best nurtured by experts in its care and feeding. In other words, the caucus serves as a mediating mechanism between community and authoritative decision-makers, protecting the latter against "socially disruptive" conflict, taking the "heat" off them, and assuring continuity of policy and perspective on the board.

Theoretically, we would expect caucuses to be typically used in low-conflict high-resource communities, and such is the case in our sample. If districts are categorized into those in which the caucus has a virtual monopoly over nominations on the one hand (19) and those in which petition nominations are commonly used on the other (29), the relationship to social structure is clear. Twelve of the former districts are high in social rank; twenty-two of the latter are low in social rank. Twenty of the twenty-nine petition districts are high in election dissent, and seventeen of these are low in social rank.

We cannot infer, of course, that these relationships among status, the use of mediating mechanisms, and conflict are necessarily "rational," ie., consciously devised. Nor can we say that one necessarily causes the

other. Whether the caucus is used because it manages conflict or exists because the conditions of conflict permit it to, we cannot be sure. What the data seem to establish firmly, however, is the high probability of systematic co-relationships among these three variables. Thus the caucus can be seen as a linkage of a theoretical and probably even of a practical sort between the community and the decision-making system.

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